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ABSTRACT

Nyungar is the name used by the Aboriginal people of southwest Australia. A 1993 ethnographic study conducted for an Aboriginal university group, corroborated by 1996 data, suggests that a reasonable number of non-Aboriginal teachers believe that assimilation of Nyungar students is essential for their success at school and in future life. This belief is translated into assimilationist teaching practices and school culture, which in turn results in low academic success, very low retention, and much higher than non-Aboriginal rates of disciplinary action. The 1993 study indicated that rapport between student and teacher significantly increased student success. The rapport could occur within any model of teaching, however it was more likely to occur when students' Aboriginality was respected, and when learning processes were used that were compatible with Nyungar cultural practices, such as sharing, cooperation, and respect for students' will and responsibility for self. The study suggests that Nyungar control of Nyungar education will improve Nyungar educational outcomes, via appropriate, culturally responsive education. In 1996, two important initiatives in Nyungar education were about to be implemented--the establishment of a Nyungar primary school and a Nyungar student center at a local high school, both to be operated by the Department of Education and, ideally, staffed by Nyungars. If Nyungar culture is given due recognition, and Nyungar people have involvement and control, these initiatives should allow Nyungar children to learn in an appropriate and culturally supportive way. (TD)

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Nyungar Education in a Southwest Australian Location: A Perspective

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Abstract

Assimilation of the Nyungar kids into the system takes place. Those who assimilate better, do better in school. Those who don't assimilate well, have problems with the system (John, P.S. teacher, 6/8/93) (cited in Wooltorton, 1993).

According to this teacher, assimilation is inevitable, therefore, the school should assist that process. This paper examines and presents a perspective on the extent and effect of assimilation and suggests that the negative outcomes of the education of Nyungars is a result of assimilationist teaching practices and school culture. Further, it recommends that Nyungar education be underpinned by Nyungar control of Nyungar education, which consists of the following principles: Nyungar decision makers, Nyungar teachers, Nyungar parent involvement in educational implementation and decision making and culturally appropriate teaching methods and teaching spaces.

Introduction

Nyungar is the name used by the Aboriginal people of the south west of Australia to describe themselves. The appellative Nyungar describes the people, country and culture. This paper refers to a region in the southwest of Australia. It has a population of about 27,000 people of which about 1,000 are Nyungars (referenced to the particular local council, 1996). Nyungar children attend local primary schools and high schools in age-graded groups. In each of two local primary schools Nyungar children represent about 20% of the school population, and in one local high school Nyungar children represent about 5% of its student population[1]. (Holland - personal communication May, 1996). The children have no particular cultural recognition or acknowledgment at school, other than in a negative sense through racism which was incidentally documented in a 1993 report (Wooltorton).

This paper describes the situation of Nyungar children at school. It suggests that the education of Nyungars is assimilations. It also suggests that a reasonable number of non-Aboriginal teachers believe that assimilation[2] of Nyungars is essential and inevitable for the students' success, both at school and in future life, and that this belief is translated in the school system to assimilationist teaching practices and school culture, which in turn results in outcomes which typically, are characterised by low academic success, very low retention and much higher than non-Aboriginal rates of disciplinary action resulting from classroom and school-yard conflict.

This paper is founded upon an extensive 1993 ethnographic research study conducted on behalf of Katijin, a local university Aboriginal student group. It includes 1996 data which suggests that the 1993 findings remain relevant. As a conclusion, the paper introduces a ray of hope for the future in two new initiatives in Nyungar education which are soon to be implemented in local schools.

Nyungar Education is Characterised By Low Academic Success, Low Retention and High Rates of Discipline Breaches

The education system is failing with regard to Nyungars. However, it is important to state at the outset that there are many individual success stories within the system, both with teachers and students. The 1993 study found a number of teachers who had empathy and rapport with Nyungar students on the basis of recognition of the students' culture and the use of appropriate communication and teaching styles. Nyungar students loved and had respect for these teachers, and their academic results demonstrated this care. However, these successes do not stand out against the systemic failure which the statistics reveal.

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[1]The percentage figure for Nyungar students entering year 8 is likely to be higher than this.

[2] (Assimilation, which succeeded segregation, was the official Aboriginal Education policy from the late 1940s to the early 1970s.)

The government authority responsible for education in Western Australia has identified that Aboriginal students achieve lower standards of performance (than non-Aboriginal students) in the curriculum areas of English, Mathematics, Science, and Studies of Society and the Environment (1994, 15), and Physical and Health education (1994, 92) across all year levels. In summarising the performance results of Year 10 Aboriginal students in Reading the Department stated:

> *Aboriginal students in general, perform well below the levels of non-Aboriginal students, with approximately 45 percent of the group sampled performing below Level 4. The results indicate a highly significant and disabling level of underachievement that is reflected in various other indicators of success, such as subsequent employment and tertiary admission. ...Absenteeism...is still an area for concern (1993, 26).*

In a more recent report on student achievement in Studies of Society and the Environment in Government Schools the Department of Education states that:

> *The mean performance of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students was significantly lower than for other students in the sample at each year level.*
> *The level of performance of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students from Year 3 through to Year 10 was characterised by achievement described by Level 2.*
> (1994, 103)

These performance results tend to indicate serious deficiencies in an education system which declares in its Strategic Plan 1994-1996 that its primary objective is : *to provide learning programs that will equip students with the skills necessary to succeed in a constantly changing social and economic environment.* (1994, 4).

Referring to benchmark measuring devices such as the Tertiary Entrance Examination (TEE), Aboriginal education in W.A. is largely unsuccessful, in that most Aboriginal students do not often complete high school to TEE level with many leaving school before or at the minimum school leaving age. In December 1995, only one Nyungar high school student in this place attempted (unsuccessfully) his/her TEE. (Holland, Department of Education - personal communication, May, 1996) This is comparable with the Katijin study of 1989, which revealed that less than 2% of Nyungar students completed their TEE in the whole South West of Western Australia (Katijin, 1989), and, for a period of 5 years to 1992 only one Nyungar had completed Year 12 schooling in the particular locality (South Western Times, Sept. 1993)

According to a study of suspensions and exclusions from Western Australian high schools carried out in 1993, Aboriginal students, who at the time made up less than 5% of the school population, accounted for almost half of all exclusions (Gardiner, Evans and Howell, 1995). Exclusions result from repeated, serious breaches of school discipline. A study currently in progress which is investigating teachers and students perceptions of high school discipline, has signalled communication and rapport, or lack of it, as a contributing factor to the problems experienced by teachers and students (Partington, Waugh and Forrest, in progress).

Current Nyungar Schooling is Assimilatory

This following is a transcribed interview about a classroom exchange involving a Nyungar high school student and his teacher. According to an extensive ethnographic study in 1993, this scene is representative of classroom dynamics involving Nyungar children in this place. The exchange is an example of both assimilationist expectations and behaviour on behalf of the non-Aboriginal teacher and a real example of the effect of lack of rapport between the teacher and student.

The transcription

Interview: Malcolm (year 8 Nyungar)

Do you like to come to school every day?
Not every day.
Not every day...why not?
It's boring.
What's boring about it?
The work, gotta write all the time.
Can you tell me how you behave in the classroom?
I'm a bit naughty.
How are you naughty?
Talk, and that.
Do you talk right from the beginning?
No.
What do you do at the beginning?
Sit down, teacher tell me to take my file out, and I don't.
Why not?
Don't wanna do the work.
Then what happens?
She tell me to take out my file. If I don't take it out, she'll send me to upper school withdrawal.
Can you explain to me why you decide not to take your file out? (pause...)
How do you feel?
Angry.
Angry...at the teacher?

Yes.

Why do you feel angry?

She yells. She always worry about school rules.

And you decide not to worry about school rules?

mmm

Why?

(Pause ...)

Ok. So you said you don't talk at the beginning of the class. What do you do after you have taken out your file?

Just write one to ten on the page, then do (the subject).

You just write 1 - 10 down, then she (tells you the things to write), does she?

No, she writes on the board, and we don't do nothin' else 'cos it takes a whole period.

So what do you do? (Work) as fast as you can?

I do some of them, and then I draw.

On the page, or on a different page?

On the page, and on my hand.

What does the teacher say?

Do your work.

What do you say?

I don't listen.

And then sometimes you talk?

Yeah, to (my friend).

Does he sit next to you?

Near the wall, in the corner, in the desk next to me.

Why do you talk with him?

Because I feel like it ... because I'm bored ...

Talking about your behaviour, will you tell me how your lesson goes, from the beginning?

First we stand outside, then we push and shove, then we gotta stand still, then we go inside, sit down, teacher say: 'Take out your file', but I don't, some people do. If someone talk, then she go to the school rule, then she say, 'do you know what this school rule is?' and they say 'no'. Then they get sent outside, then we get on with the work and we do some (particular subject), then they are still on the first question. When they on the second question, I take out my file. I do it. Then I stop, then I draw.

What happens after you draw?

She tell me to take off my hat, but I don't. I stop drawing.

Do you learn any (of the subject)?

A little bit.

What happens when you talk to your friend?

Yesterday, I kept talking, and I got sent to upper school withdrawal.

How did you feel about that?

Good.

So, you didn't mind being in there at all?
No.
What did you do in there?
Worksheets.
Did you do the worksheet?
Yes.
Did you draw on it?
No.
Are you ever well behaved in (this subject)?
Sometimes.
What are you like most of the time?
Most of the time I be naughty (Malcolm, year 8, 27/8/93).

The quotation below is Maxine's perspective. (Maxine is the teacher referred to above by Malcolm.)

They walk in the door and we ask them to take their hats off. And this one little Aboriginal boy at the moment, all right, he'll do it after you've asked him three times and then he gets angry and he stuffs it in his bag. He is ready to fight with me for the next 10 minutes instead of getting on with the (particular class).
Is that Malcolm?
Yes it is actually.
Right. Funny, he told me about the hat.
He gets so upset, but the thing is we make all the other white kids take their hats off and he's new in the class. So all the other kids take their hats off because that's what we've established over the full year. Actually I feel sorry for him, he's just a bit lost at the moment. ....He's got a really bad reading problem (which is the root of his problem with this subject). We do a lot of problem solving maths but it's the way to do work. What we do is write one question on the board and they've got to read it and they've got to answer it. It's all in words, it's all hidden words and then we try and do about 10 a day and they are all different but they all build up as the year goes along, so they get really good. They really get very good. They don't know they are getting really good, but they are. Better than a lot of the other unit classes at the same standard because they are getting taught to think about what kind of question it is, instead of (the other methodology which they like more but don't learn anything from). And in this way we really build up the concept. We are doing about 40-50 different objectives in (the subject area) and we're quite pleased with ourselves because we know those kids are learning. They hate it, but never mind, there's no point in doing it the way they've been taught in primary school for 7 years, because it hasn't worked there. But by the time we've finished with them in year 8, most of them we can put into a higher level, where the teacher will say, 'open a book, and have a go'. I really think most of them can do it better after being in this class than they would have otherwise. Hard work, very hard work. I don't blame them. I mean, I don't know what else to do (Maxine, H.S. teacher,

20/8/93).

.....

The study referred to above found that practices which underpinned Nyungar education were assimilatory, rather than focusing on the recognition of Nyungar culture which is the current government policy. According to the 1995 statistics, it appears that little has changed. Nyungar underachievement is associated with assimilatory teaching practices as well as an assimilationist school culture (Wooltorton, 1993, 5). The research data does show that Nyungar students who are more assimilated do perform better at school. The following quotations from teachers involved in the 1993 study express this succinctly:

> *If you look at the kids who are very good (Nyungar) how they come to school dressed, family background, more Wadjela[3] type background than traditional Nyungar backgrounds, perhaps they seem to do better: those kids who are more assimilated.*
> ***So schools try to assimilate Nyungar kids?***
> *I don't know whether it is just schools; perhaps society in general does that.*
> ***And schools in particular?***
> *I guess it is a strong influence in their lives*
> *(Mathew, P.S. teacher, 27/8/93).*

> *Assimilation of the Nyungar kids into the system takes place. Those who assimilate better, do better in school. Those who don't assimilate well, have problems with the system (John, P.S. teacher, 6/8/93)* (cited in Wooltorton, 1993).

Teacher Attitudes

What these quotations also show is that the teachers recognise what happens in schools, that the system can cope with assimilated Nyungars. It seems that they believe that the measures which should be taken by the researcher (and others) is to find ways to assist Nyungar children to become assimilated. There is often an underlying assumption that Nyungar students (with the support of their parents) want to be assimilated into the culture of the school: that they aspire to the same values, attitudes, behaviours and processes of learning as Wadjela students, and that the goals of education are the same for Nyungar students as for Wadjela students.

Based on these comments, which, according to the data are fairly representative of teacher attitudes, and given the poor performance statistics outlined above, we can assume that teachers translate these underlying beliefs into teaching practices which are assimilationist and which perpetuate the exclusion of many Nyungar children from a satisfying and successful education.

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[3]Wadjela: non-Aboriginal person (Nyungar language).

Towards Culturally Appropriate Nyungar Education

The 1993 Wooltorton study indicated that rapport between student and teacher significantly increased the chances of student success. The study indicated that the rapport could occur within the context of any model of teaching (ie, autocratic, democratic or student-centred), however it was more likely to occur when there was respect for the student's Aboriginality, and when learning processes were used which were in harmony with Nyungar cultural practices, such as sharing, co-operation, and respect for students' will and responsibility for self.

There is no specific data on Nyungar cultural learning styles, however the following broad principles can be drawn from the data and the above report:

*accepting real responsibility as a group member
*self-directed learning (by doing)
*watching and joining in, versus working under step by step verbal instruction
*assisting and considering others while learning
*trial and error
*person-orientation in verbal learning ('formal' learning relationships with significant others based on rapport, mutual obligation and mutual respect)

The most common complaint about school from both Nyungar parents and students, concerned the implementation of "rules and regulations" in various applications, versus the Nyungar students' autonomy. Nyungar parents explained how Nyungar children learn through watching and autonomously doing what they will as soon as they are able. Nyungar children orient themselves to people and have great value placed on their relationships with people, versus the teachers' requirements to attend to solo tasks.

Nyungar Control of Education for Nyungars

This paper, and the 1993 ethnographic study, suggest that the establishment of Nyungar control of Nyungar education will bring about improvement in Nyungar education outcomes, via an appropriate, culturally responsive education. Improved teacher-student rapport, and culturally appropriate teaching, are logical outcomes of Nyungar control. By 'Nyungar control' is meant that educational decisions be made by Nyungars, that Nyungars are the teachers and teaching assistants - the deliverers of education, and that Nyungar parents are integral in the education decision making and implementation process. This scenario may produce a Nyungar curriculum which would integrate Nyungar culture and language. Central to the notion of Nyungar control, is the right to be Indigenous, a right expressed repeatedly at the 1993 World Indigenous People's Education Conference:

> The right to be Indigenous is an essential prerequisite to developing and maintaining culturally appropriate and sustainable education for Indigenous peoples....Education must be scholarly

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> The right to be Indigenous is an essential prerequisite to developing and maintaining culturally appropriate and sustainable education for Indigenous peoples....Education must be scholarly

> and empowering whist at the same time the processes of education must be embedded in Indigenous culture and wisdom (Working paper: Coolangatta statement on Indigenous Rights in Education, 1993).

Current policy and future directions

The current policy in Nyungar education focuses on reconciliation, the recognition of Nyungar culture, and the participation of Nyungar people in decision making about Aboriginal education. The National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Education Policy (1993) sets this out clearly and this policy is reaffirmed by the Ministerial Council on Education Employment Training and Youth Affairs in its 1995 National Education Strategy document. (MCEETYA, 1995, 1).

In 1996, two important initiatives in Nyungar education are about to be implemented with a small number of Nyungar children. These are the commencement of a Nyungar primary school, and the establishment of a Nyungar student centre at a local high school. These have been planned and developed by the Department of Education, after extensive consultation with Nyungar community members. Both establishments will be operated by the Department of Education and ideally will be staffed by Nyungars. If Nyungar culture is given due recognition, and Nyungar people involvement and control, it is considered that these initiatives have considerable potential to allow Nyungar children to learn in an appropriate and culturally supportive way.

Conclusion

This paper has presented evidence to show that education of Nyungar children is assimilatory. It has identified negative outcomes from a system of education which tends to ignore the Aboriginality of Nyungar children. The paper suggests that if there is real regard for Nyungar cultural practices and the meaningful involvement of Nyungar personnel in the education implementation and decision making, Nyungar students will finally have the opportunity to succeed at school. Nyungar students have the right to an Indigenous education. For this reason, if the two initiatives in Nyungar education comply with this condition, there will finally be hope.

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